

Progress through partnership: Providing Holistic Services VIA SERVICE LEARNING to Benefit Students, the University and the Community

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ABSTRACT:

In 2012, the presenters developed a new service learning opportunity through an interdisciplinary partnership between the schools of Law and Social Work. The purpose of the project was to enhance the joint JD/MSW program, as well as the experiences of JD and MSW students respectively. The presenters redesigned a Civil Practice Clinic, which had formerly involved only law students, to now pair law students and social work students in order to serve the holistic needs of clients. Referrals for the clinic are obtained through a variety of partner referrals. All of the clinic's clients do not have the resources to retain legal counsel or services by other means. The law students address the clients' legal issues and the social work students ensure the clients are connected with appropriate social services, such as domestic violence counseling and social welfare benefits. The teamwork between students increases law students' aptitude in client-centered lawyering, and familiarizes social work students with the legal rights and resources available to clients. The presenters have adapted pedagogies of engagement, most notably through problem-based and peer-led interdisciplinary team teaching and learning. Students more effectively and efficiently serve community members in need of legal counsel and social services, resulting in a clinic that is beneficial for both students and community members.

The partnership resulted after years of witnessing law students struggle with interpersonal skills how to handle client emotions (and a perceived inability to help connect to services) while social work students struggled with an awareness of the law, litigation process/strategy and the roles/responsibilities involved in legal case management. Key to this partnership was not only the development of the interdisciplinary model and structure, but also assessing both disciplines and the success of the pairings. Quantitative data is gathered through an interpersonal skills survey pretest and posttest research design, and qualitative data is gathered through a survey of open ended questions. All students were given the same questions, and responses were anonymous, with surveys administered by a third party. Using the generated responses, the presenters reformat the course each semester based upon feedback, as well as promote the use of this sort of model to other institutions and at various conferences. Other interdisciplinary partnerships are also explored based on student feedback, client and clinic needs.

The initial surveys focused on a main goal of increasing law students' interpersonal skills – as far too often law students' focus is on the legal tasks and not the human components of interactions with clients. Data analysis found a statistically significant improvement in law students' interpersonal skills, and level of comfort in dealing with clients in emotional situation. The second round of surveys have been submitted to both disciplines and hope to show two increases: 1) that the law students' interpersonal skills maintain improvement; and 2) that social work students have a better understanding of the law and legal processes via their participation in the interdisciplinary clinic.